

Case Study

Introduction

The coachee that I would like to share as my case study I shall call AS to protect her confidentiality. She is a GP who has worked in one of the boroughs that I also work in, so we have some awareness of each other's spheres of work, though prior to working together we didn't have more than a passing acquaintance. The Chair of her Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), for which she does some sessional work, suggested she might find the offer of coaching helpful. When we spoke in March 2020 for an initial 'chemistry conversation' AS appeared keen to use this opportunity. She was completely understanding about me being a trainee, relating to this I think as an experienced trainer of doctors herself. Shortly afterwards the onset of the pandemic consumed us both from a work perspective for some months, so it wasn't until after the summer that we reconnected and began our work together in earnest. We 'met' (through zoom) for a total of 6 sessions over a period of 6 months. We also agreed that AS would arrange the zoom sessions and send the link, something I had learned from work with another coachee helped bring ownership of the sessions being for their benefit.

First session

Do not believe in me or any other teacher, rather trust in your own inner voice. This is your guide; this is your teacher. Your teacher is within, not without. Know yourself, not me

In our first session we easily reconnected despite the gap since first speaking. I think our shared experience of being medics working as part of the NHS response to Covid helped create an easy rapport between us and equally enabled a shared agreement re confidentiality. We contracted to meet for sessions of two hours for a proposed total of 6 times. We were both familiar and comfortable with doing so through video, though didn't rule out meeting in person in the future.

In this first session I used the PRIDE model to explore her hopes for our coaching overall. She identified the primary goal she wanted to focus on in our sessions being her role as a 'parity' partner within her practice and whether to pursue full partnership or not. Exploring this further through a chunking approach broadened this to uncertainty about the balance of her various roles – as educator, as appraiser, as manager and as a clinician.

Much of the session revolved around her sharing her background to becoming a GP. AS spoke very freely and I quickly realised that it might be a possible challenge to steer the conversation to ensure focus. In this first session though I instinctively felt it was important to let her tell her story – not just to embed rapport but also to understand her journey to this point. Born in India, an only child of medical parents, AS pursued what felt to be their dream for her to follow her father's footsteps despite what proved to be a significant challenge to secure a place at medical school. AS spoke of further interrupted aspirations eg to pursue a career in obstetrics in part through coming to the UK to marry another doctor. The quote I have written above was something AS shared during the session that an influential teacher had shared with her as a child. As I listened, I had the sense that AS has some deep-seated ambivalence about becoming a doctor. This is something she carries with her in how she thinks about her current role at work and also in her role as a mother, wanting to ensure her own children are enabled to 'follow their inner voices'.

Hearing this part of her history was significant and enabled me to understand some of her internal narrative influencing her current uncertainty re her role. However, I also found it difficult to manage the session with respect to timing and to know when to interrupt given her rather over-inclusive style of speech. I felt acutely aware of being a psychiatrist and not wanting to inadvertently drift into

a therapeutic space though, somewhat ironically, I think my experience in psychiatry helped me manage the need to interrupt sensitively.

Time was too limited to complete all aspects of the PRIDE model. This was a learning experience for me: to sit with that internal discomfort of not following the plan. Whilst AS was able to identify some different options open to her with regard to her work we weren't able to explore these fully but agreed that she would reflect on these ahead of our next meeting. I reflected subsequently that I was left unclear of her hoped for outcome from the coaching overall and planned to explore this further at the next session.

Second Session

We were able to easily establish a connection again, despite the fact that I hadn't touched base in between as I had intended to do. AS once again presented as eager to share what had been going on in her world, both at work and at home. I tried to assess her state and respond to this myself by allowing her to share what seemed to be bubbling out of her. I had to consciously stop myself from jumping in because I had that same sense of time ticking and not being able to make the most use of our session. In fact, I found that this approach of consciously not interrupting helped because as I presented a calmness in response to her slight flooding of information it felt as though she began to mirror this calmness back, even across zoom. I reflected later that this 'match, pace, lead' from NLP enabled me to then lead it back, not by responding to the detail of what she had shared but rather to revisiting what her hoped-for goals were.

I used the well-formed outcome approach to explore this further, building upon the other aspects of her life that we had only just touched upon in our first session. I felt that this approach worked well because it enabled her to think more broadly about the outcome she had first identified – being parity partner – as not in fact having the right 'fit' with the rest of her life. When she immersed herself in imagining what it would **feel** like she was able to rapidly identify not just the positive aspect 'of feeling valued and respected' but also recognised some of the barriers which had perhaps prevented her pursuing this previously (fearful of more decision-making, responsibility, financial risk). This led to her re-evaluating the desirability of her previous outcome and concluding that she felt ready to let go as it were of the drive for parity partner. Instead, she reflected that this had symbolised something more significant for her re feeling valued. She further linked this to wanting to use the coaching space to explore the 'right' balance within her various work roles and also in her life more widely, including her role as a mother.

Third Session

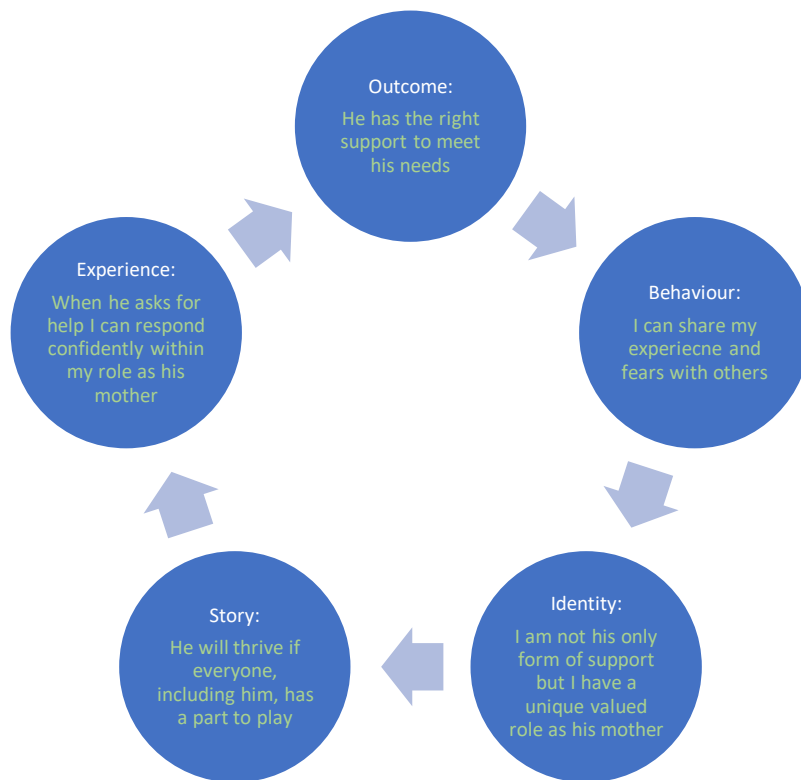
Ahead of this session, after discussion with my supervisor re how to both record sessions and also link in between them, I emailed AS to ask her to think about what we might focus on in the next session. Adopting a low key approach in this communication felt comfortable to me and one which she responded to with a request to think about her relationship with her son. I think this reflected that the well-formed outcome from our last session had enabled her to think differently about the focus of our work together.

I began with using the PRIDE model to explore the issue relating to supporting her son in managing his anxiety but with a higher-level aim related to this emerging theme of feeling valued, in this case as a mother. I decided to try using the 'narrative rewind' approach that we had explored during Carol Pemberton's resilience masterclass. I found this difficult to do, in part because of my lack of familiarity with the model and it was also hard to do across zoom – I wanted to draw it out together

to illustrate the process, particularly because initially AS didn't understand what I was asking of her. I was tempted to abandon it (!) but I persevered and was glad in the end because there was a shift when exploring the 'story' aspect. I used the Y-technique to push a little to understand what I sensed was an underlying anxiety and this proved to be the case. AS shared that she had a fear that her son might take a knife to harm himself, something that I don't think she had acknowledged to herself as something she worried about in the back of her mind. There was another significant moment during the exercise that I was aware of when I asked AS 'what could you do differently to get the outcome you want?'. In response she directly asked my views and I felt that she was appealing to my expertise here as a psychiatrist. I was able to reflect this back to her asking what ideas she had, and further decided to directly acknowledge that I didn't think knowledge in this case was key, rather her experience was.

I have tried to demonstrate below how this exercise played out during the session. My reflections overall were that I found using the model a little stilted and forced at times but in the end felt it had helped her create a different narrative. At the end we also discussed that the next session would be observed by my supervisor, something she agreed to.





Fourth Session

This was an observed session, with prior agreement, with Jacqui joining on zoom (video off) for the session and then joining us 'in person' at the end to share some of her observations.

The session started with AS immediately updating me, at some length, that she had recently volunteered to work in the local Covid vaccination centre about which she spoke with great pride. I did find it hard to put to one side that Jacqui was observing the session and found in particular that I was aware of the recurring issue of knowing when to interrupt her free-flowing narrative. I also found it hard to clarify the intended outcome of focus for the session.

AS described wanting help to think through a dilemma at work re whether to apply for a further role within the CCG or within the emerging integrated care system. This necessitated an election process and AS shared uncertainty re her readiness to go through with this process or not. I explored this with her and tried to encourage her to outline the possible options. Whilst able to articulate the areas of work theoretically open to her – education / appraisal / governing body / clinical – it was much harder to support AS in distilling where her real passion, commitment and, importantly, opportunity lay. Although I tried to return AS to our agreed outcome for the session – whether to apply to the governing body or not – I found she tended to return to her areas of interest rather than the decision at hand. Exploring this further left me with the sense that underpinning this was at core some self-doubt and fear of failure if she were to stand and not be elected.

Jacqui joined us at the end and helpfully reflected to AS that she might think about her own internal resources and what she feels able to 'fly the flag for'. After AS left the session Jacqui shared some of her observations of the session including that AS appeared rather chaotic in her thinking despite my attempts to bring some focus to the session. I found this rather reassuring since it has been a consistent challenge for me during our work together. Jacqui left me with the thought that I might consider using the logical levels framework to explore the congruence of her choices with what she wants.

Fifth session

I had followed up by email following our last observed session to clarify that we had two remaining sessions left and to ask for her thoughts re how we might make best use of the time remaining to us. Mindful of the difficulty I had encountered in achieving consistent clarity re outcome I further reflected that at the last session she was debating re applying for a role and wondered if she wished to explore this further. Her response was to ask to meet more urgently, though not to discuss the role which was no longer an issue.

I was immediately struck by her 'state'. The buzz when describing her work at the forefront of the covid vaccination response previously had been replaced by a low affect. It was so palpable that I immediately reflected this back to her, and she appeared relieved by my observation. She spoke of feeling a shift in the dynamic within the centre – the camaraderie, teamwork and shared community pride that had been a source of sustenance before had been replaced by feeling the centre was being run in a way that was not consistent with her values. I decided to focus the session on thinking about resilience and used the emotional quadrants as a vehicle to do so. She responded really well to this and when I subsequently shared the quadrant diagram on screen, with the different quadrants pre-populated with adjectives, this resonated strongly with her. In particular she saw many of the adjectives she had generated herself when reflecting on her initial work at the centre within the thriving quadrant and more recently in the surviving/burnout quadrants. I then asked her to focus on the descriptors within the recharge zone, which had been noticeably absent, and for her to think about what fostered these emotions for her. She found it helpful to reflect on this and the type of activities she knew were nurturing for her. At the end she spoke of feeling it had "given me permission" to step back from the vaccination centre and instead focus on what gives her sustenance in her personal life. She asked me to send her the quadrant diagram to reflect further and hoped to use it herself for a forthcoming session she was doing with her colleagues.

Sixth and final session 6

In keeping with my overall experience of our sessions having a slightly shifting focus the last one was no exception and AS came wishing to explore a dilemma re her youngest son. As we did so I reflected on how she was more able to self-coach, as it were, the answers to her own dilemma. As she outlined the issue she was concerned about – his forthcoming transition to secondary school and the need for specialist support – I observed that the initially articulated frustration with the school for not doing enough was replaced by her rehearsing the steps she had taken herself. She concluded that she needed to be at one with what she had done: "Good enough is good enough" she said.

The rest of the session was spent with ensuring we brought our coaching to a thoughtful end. I was grateful to have planned for how I would structure this for it didn't just remind me of the importance of endings but it also empowered me to ask for feedback, something I am traditionally loathe to do. I confess that I was taken aback at her reflections of our work together. Whilst I was so often feeling a lack of clarity in our sessions, when it came to this reflection of her experience of the coaching AS was remarkably focussed and precise in her feedback. She spoke of feeling clearer. "You've helped me clear out the cobwebs. I feel in a good place – you have enabled me to concentrate on what's important to ME." In response to asking what had helped facilitate this she spoke of the sense of a safe space, being able to have an honest conversation, that it is OK to have doubts and being enabled to sit with something uncomfortable. She described feeling as though the

layers of an onion had been peeled away to allow her to look at herself and what she wanted for herself rather than being driven by perceived external factors.

I was particularly pleased, given my fear of drifting into a therapeutic or directive space, that she reflected that she hadn't experienced me as giving out answers, yet at the same time had found some of the insights I had shared helpful. She described feeling my use of anecdote was well-judged, invoking an experience of being listened to and understanding her perspective.

When I asked what hadn't worked so well, she felt that I didn't need to worry so much about following particular models and to trust my own style. However she recognised that this had been part of my learning journey and also reflected that she had seen a shift in me over the months of meeting. We ended on that positive note, not agreeing to meet again, but with the sense that we had each helped the other in perhaps ways we hadn't foreseen. I thought back to the quote that she had shared with me in the very first session and that perhaps that was the clue to her desired outcome – to find and heed her own inner voice.

Summary and overall reflection

I found working with AS an extremely formative experience. Working with someone so willing to engage, and who was so understanding of me being a trainee, was a wonderful setting against which to test out approaches and develop a more nuanced style of coaching. In the process I have gained confidence, particularly in the context of the unexpectedly affirmative feedback she gave me which took me by surprise. Reflecting on this I feel I should ensure I pay more attention to evaluating and getting feedback through regular check-ins as I go rather than waiting to the end.

Other reflections include that both being doctors made me particularly aware of the ethical issues of confidentiality and the need to observe professional boundaries. I found that negotiating the practicalities and specifics of the coaching contract is something that doesn't come naturally to me and so I need to not be avoidant of this important aspect of coaching. Using different approaches was quite revealing to me since my initial instinct was to focus on getting greater familiarity with a small number of techniques. Instead, I found that as issues emerged during sessions the nature of them often suggested an approach that made more sense, so I had to be more flexible in response to this. Whilst this was uncomfortable at times, since I felt ill-prepared, my overall feeling is that this proved more effective and that I need to focus on ensuring greater familiarity with a range of techniques rather than shoe-horn a few into situations that don't fit.

With respect to some of the other key competencies in the realms of communication, being attentive, establishing rapport and reflecting insights I feel more confident. My experience as a psychiatrist helps me here, although I need to be mindful of being a coach in this space not a therapist. Equally that as a manager and mentor I am used to being quite directive and this is something I must guard against. The feedback of AS feeling empowered to reach her own conclusions, alongside a few specific moments within our sessions when I observed her doing so by me consciously holding back, were powerful reinforcers of this.

I began with a quote and now end with one which I think captures one of my key reflections on this case study.

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou